

# NEVER GOING BACK

## AN ANALYSIS OF PARENT SENTIMENT IN EDUCATION

AUGUST 2022

NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS



NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR  
**PUBLIC  
CHARTER  
SCHOOLS**



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# PARENTS LIKE THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE THE BEST EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE FOR THEIR CHILDREN. IT MAY BE THE ONE THING JUST ABOUT EVERYONE IN AMERICA CAN AGREE ON.

## Introduction

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The COVID-19 pandemic forever changed our world. When talking about events, people often speak in terms of pre- or post-pandemic times, and it's common to hear the phrase "Things will never be the same." Nowhere is that truer than in PreK–12 education. Not only will the education experience for students never be the same, the way parents think about education is also fundamentally different.

In 2021, our team at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools wanted to find out what happened with public school enrollment during the pandemic—at both district schools and charter schools. Anecdotal data suggested an unusually high level of enrollment shifts, so we dug deeper to learn more. Based on data collected from 42 State Educational Agencies<sup>1</sup>, we learned that at least 1.4 million students left their district public schools during the first full year of the pandemic. We also learned that nearly 240,000 new students enrolled in public charter schools during the same period. While that was very interesting information, it left us with even more questions. So, we commissioned The Harris Poll to conduct a survey to help us better understand the movement and motivations of school-type switchers during and prior to the pandemic.

Perhaps most importantly, we wondered what happened to the students who left public schools altogether during the pandemic. According to the National Alliance's 2021 report "Voting with Their Feet," more than one million students did not enroll in district or charter

schools. Where did they land? We were also curious about why families decided to switch the type of school their children attend. Was it for purely academic reasons, or were there other considerations? Are they happy with their choices?

The amount of PreK–12 educational change during the pandemic was substantial. Before nearly every school in America was locked down in the Spring of 2020, there was probably little reason for parents to be hyper-focused on their children's educational experience. Things were moving along as usual, and then within a few weeks of being at home all day with their children, parents were able to see first-hand what their students were learning, or not learning. Some students were receiving only a few hours of remote-learning instruction *per week*. Parents began to talk among themselves, sharing tips with each other. It was abundantly clear that those with multiple options for their children's education were in a better position than those without.

Many families who had relied on a centralized district-run school were frustrated. So, they learned quickly and became experts on school choice. During the pandemic, we saw an enrollment surge in charter schools, private schools, and home schooling, while enrollment in district schools plummeted. Some believe these were temporary switches and everything will return to normal after we get through the pandemic. We wondered about that, among other questions, too. That's why we

commissioned this national survey of more than 5,000 parents by The Harris Poll. This survey examined parents' educational choices and patterns, satisfaction with school options, and the likely significance of education as an issue in elections. We learned a lot.

The vast majority of parents in the survey (72%) enroll their children in the public school they are zoned to attend. Indeed, most parents make this decision without much thought of doing anything different. When asked about switching schools, 63% of parents with a child enrolled in a district public school whose children have never switched school types say they have never considered having their child switch schools.

The most important thing we learned is that most parents who made a switch are happy with the choices they made. Eighty-nine percent of parents whose children have switched school types report that they or their child experienced a positive change as a result of the switch—namely that their child is happier (57%). Parents are not

ideologically rigid about a particular type of educational experience, and 93% agree one size doesn't fit all in education. Charter schools are a popular choice among switchers, both before and during the pandemic—prior to the pandemic, the most popular switch type, at 27%, was from public district to public charter school. During and since the pandemic, this switch type was the second most popular switch type, at 14%. Also, there is a small percentage of parents, about 6%, with more than one school-aged child in the home who said their children were not enrolled in the same type of school.

The data suggests parents like the freedom to choose the best educational experience for their children. This is true across all races, political ideologies, and geographies. It may be the one thing just about everyone in America can agree on. Choice is better, and now that parents know what it feels like, we think it is likely they are never going to give it up and go back to the way it used to be.



In May 2022, nearly 1,000 parents and advocates gathered at the White House to fight for public charter schools.

# MORE THAN 4 IN 5 PARENTS AGREE THAT EDUCATION HAS BECOME A MORE IMPORTANT POLITICAL ISSUE TO THEM THAN IT WAS IN THE PAST.

## Why Focus on Parents?

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Parents are the primary decision makers for their children’s educational experiences. Given the major enrollment shifts and the rise of parent empowerment on education issues, hearing from them directly seemed like a smart thing to do.

Parents compose a critical component of American adults. About 40% of all households<sup>2</sup> in the United States have children under the age of 18 living at home, making them an important demographic and a powerful voting bloc.

In this survey, we interviewed a sample of 5,002 parents or guardians of school-aged children (grades PreK–12), spread across nationally-representative demographics. Of those interviewed, 56% were female and 42% male, with an average age of 42.3 years old. Nearly half (49%) (see Figure 1) have a high school degree to less than a four-year college degree, another 41% have a four-year college degree or more, and 10% did not graduate high school. Fifty-three percent reported a total combined household income of less than \$100,000 per year, with 47% bringing in \$100,000 or more annually (see Figure 2).

Nearly three-quarters of parents of school-aged children (72%) have a child currently enrolled in a public district school (see Figure 3). Those whose children are enrolled in a public district school tend to be from lower income (76%) and lower educational attainment households<sup>3</sup> (78% have less than a high school diploma).

By comparison, enrollment in every type of educational setting other than public district schools is much lower. This is unsurprising given the comparative number of other types of schools that exist. For example,

13% of parents surveyed have a child currently enrolled in a public charter school, and charter schools make up only 7.2% of all public schools, according to the Data Digest compiled by the National Alliance<sup>4</sup>. Charter school parents were more likely to be Democrats (17%) than Independents (12%) or Republicans (11%). They were also more likely to be parents of children with special needs (17%) than those without a special needs child (12%), and more likely to be Black (20%) or Hispanic parents (16%) than white parents (11%).

In addition to standard demographics, the surveyed parents represent an even spread across political party affiliation (see Figure 5) and the types of elections (if any) that they vote in—characteristics that were of particular interest given how politicized conversations around public charter schools can be. These parents represent a key voter base.

Not surprisingly, parents care a great deal about education, especially when compared to the average voter. In terms of issues, education consistently ranks fairly low<sup>5</sup> on the list for voters in general.

However, when focusing specifically on what parents think when voting, education shows up as a much more prominent issue. For parents who vote in federal elections, education falls within the top four considerations, preceded by the economy, taxation, and health care. Among parents who only vote in state and local elections, education is outranked by just one other issue: the economy. And further, for those parents who vote in both federal and state/local elections, when asked if any considerations become more important to them

FIGURE 1  
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

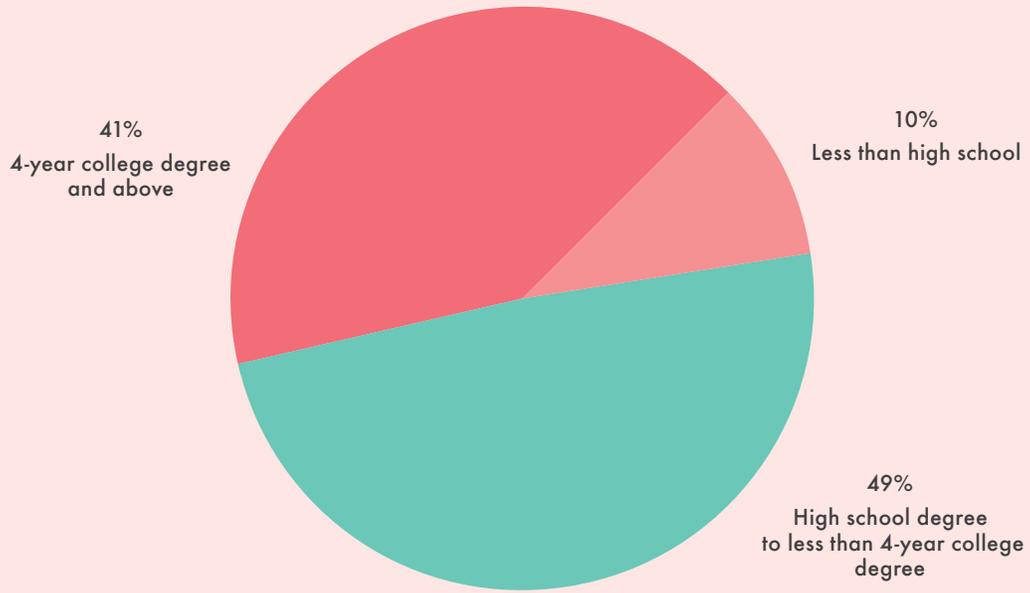


FIGURE 2  
HOUSEHOLD INCOME

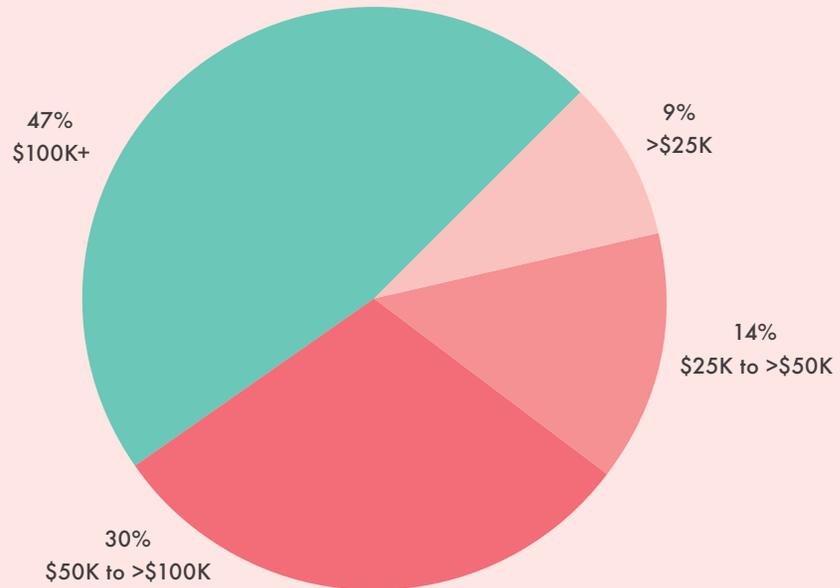
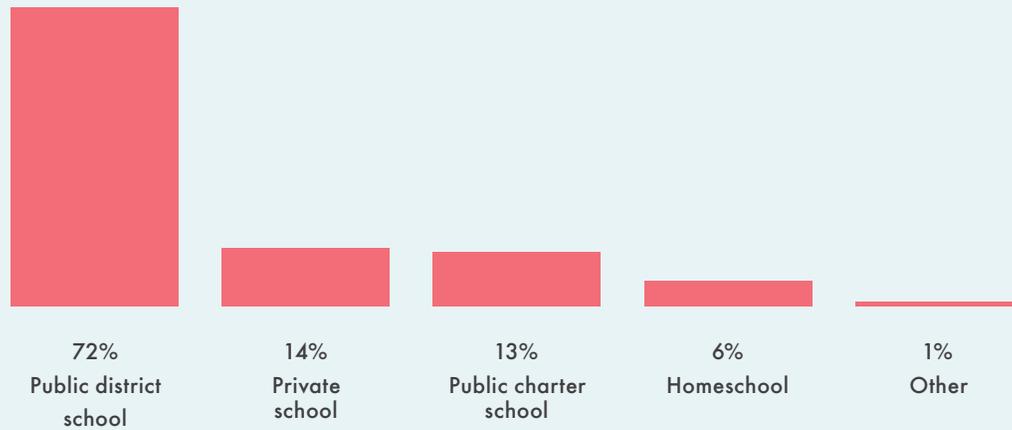


FIGURE 3  
PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO HAVE CHILDREN ENROLLED IN GRADES PreK-12 BY SCHOOL TYPE



when voting in state/local elections, education rose to the second most important issue, only slightly outpaced by taxation.<sup>6</sup> More than 4 in 5 parents (83%) agree that education has become a more important political issue to them than it was in the past (see Figure 6), with 2 in 5 *strongly* agreeing (40%), particularly both Democrats (43%) and Republicans (42%), parents with special needs children (45%), and Black parents (45%). This data suggests parents could become single-issue voters on education, regardless of political party affiliation, and that education will likely be an issue of significance in upcoming elections in Fall 2022. This topic is covered in greater detail later in the report.



A charter school family listens to speakers at a rally to defend charter schools in May 2022.

FIGURE 4  
**PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO VOTE BY ELECTION TYPE**



FIGURE 5  
**SELF-REPORTED POLITICAL CONSIDERATION**

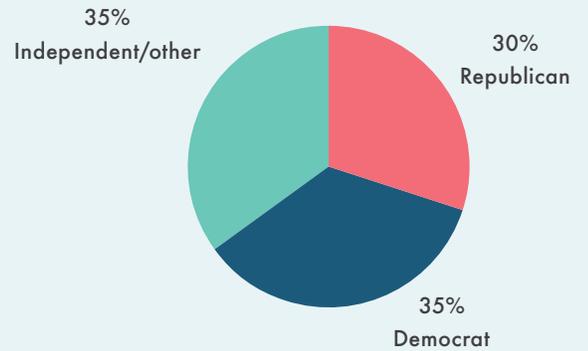
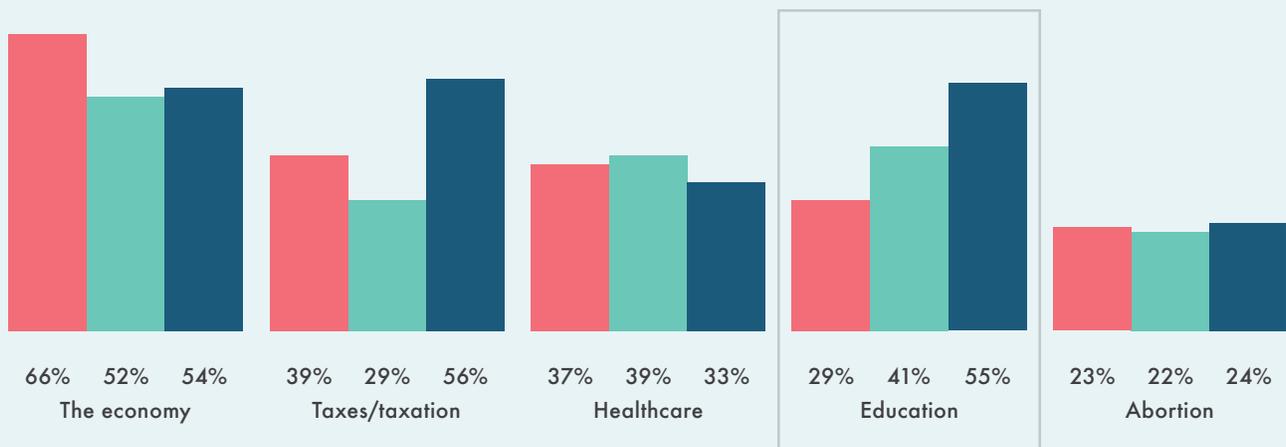


FIGURE 6  
**TOP VOTING CONSIDERATIONS, PERCENTAGES BY ELECTION TYPE**



■ Federal election considerations (n=3772)  
■ State / local election considerations (state / local voters only) (n=423)  
■ More important when voting in state / local elections (federal + state / local voters) (n=2915)

# FOR MANY PARENTS, A NEW INTEREST AND INVOLVEMENT MEANT THAT THEY WERE HIGHLY MOTIVATED TO MAKE CHANGES TO THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATION.

## Where Did All the Kids Go?

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During the first full year of the pandemic, enrollment at public district schools fell by at least 1.4 million students.<sup>7</sup> That's a lot of students.

We know that nearly 240,000 enrolled in charter schools, but that accounts for only a fraction of the movement. Where did the rest of the students go? Survey data suggests many of them simply went home, as in homeschooling. According to our survey, switching to homeschooling, both pre-pandemic and during, is consistently more common among lower-income households (44% ever switched to homeschool for families with less than \$50k annual household income vs. 30% for \$50k or more annual household income). While homeschooling may have provided a solution for some families, this is likely not a feasible long-term solution for most parents, who have limited time or resources to provide curriculum and instruction to their child or who rely on structured school time to be able to work.

Nearly one-quarter of the parents surveyed (23%) had a child enrolled in PreK and/or kindergarten, and nearly half (49%) had a child in elementary school.

Enrollment declines in public district schools were widely documented by other external sources<sup>8</sup>, with the steepest drops in the early grades, especially in kindergarten<sup>9</sup>, PreKindergarten, and elementary school. It is possible that some families simply didn't enroll their children in PreK or kindergarten in Fall 2020 or 2021. Others may have chosen to remain with a child care provider that is licensed to offer PreK and kindergarten classes. Since these are tuition-based learning environments, they would count as private

schools, though they do not necessarily match what most people would think of when they hear the term "private schools." It's unclear the extent to which these types of private school options were included in the overall count of parents who reported sending PreK and kindergarten students to private schools.

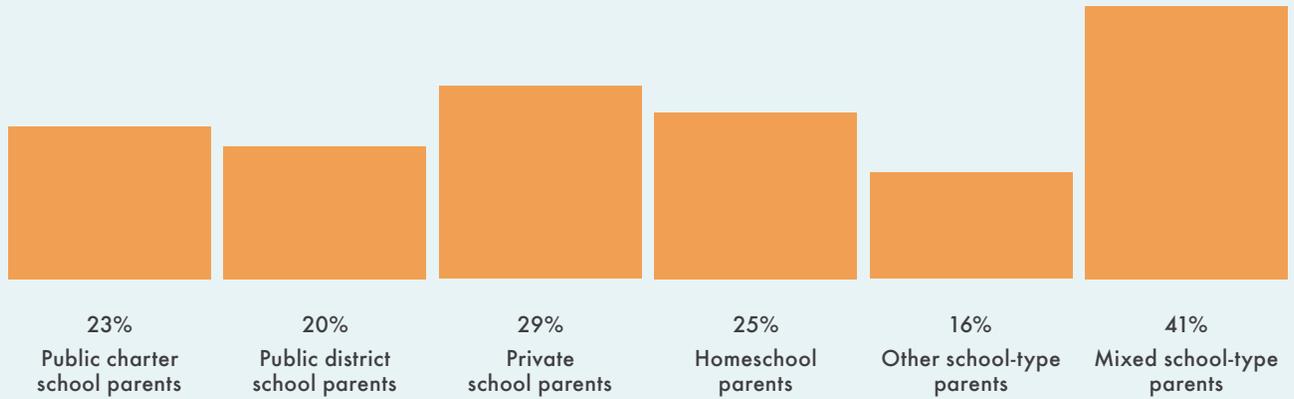
The chart (see Figure 7) that follows examines PreK and kindergarten enrollment type and is in stark contrast to Figure 3 on Page 8. On page 8, we see the vast majority of American students (72%) are enrolled in district public schools. We see below that in the earliest grades, there is a more even split among types of schools.

The pandemic opened the eyes of many parents to their children's day-to-day schooling and, as a result, affected their overarching views on education.

Eighty-four percent of parents agree that they learned more about how their child was being educated during the pandemic; 79% report that they became more interested in how their child was being educated, and 78% say they became more involved in their child's education because of what they saw of their children's education during the pandemic (see Figures 8 and 9). Lower-income parents and parents of color, in particular, were more likely to agree with these statements.

For many parents, this new interest and involvement may have made them highly motivated to make changes to their child's education. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common type of school switching was from public district school to public charter school (27%), followed by public district school to homeschool (18%), private school to public district school (17%), and public

FIGURE 7  
**PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO HAVE  
 A CHILD IN PreK/KINDERGARTEN, BY SCHOOL TYPE**



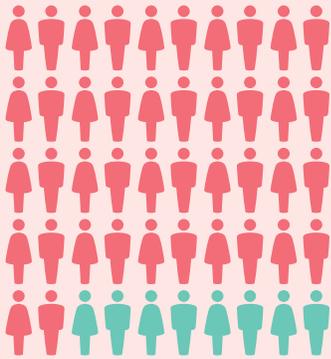
district school to private school (16%).

However, since March 2020, the most common type of switch is from public district school to homeschool (29%), followed by public district school to public charter school (14%), and public district school to private school (12%) (See Figure 10).



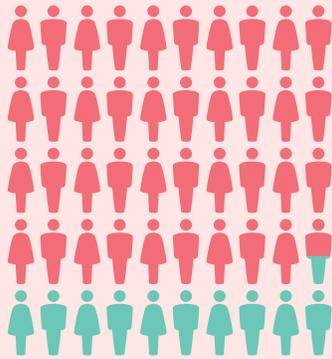
A charter school family joins the rally at the White House in May 2022.

FIGURE 8  
PARENT OBSERVATIONS IN LIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC



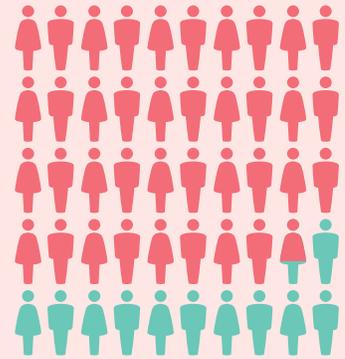
**84%**

agree that they learned more about how their child was being educated during the pandemic



**79%**

report that they became more interested in how their child was being educated during the pandemic



**78%**

say they became more involved in their child's education because of what they saw of their children's education during the pandemic



Charter school students play during a rally at the White House in May 2022.

FIGURE 9  
**LEVEL OF AGREEMENT ABOUT CHILD'S EDUCATION  
 IN LIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC**

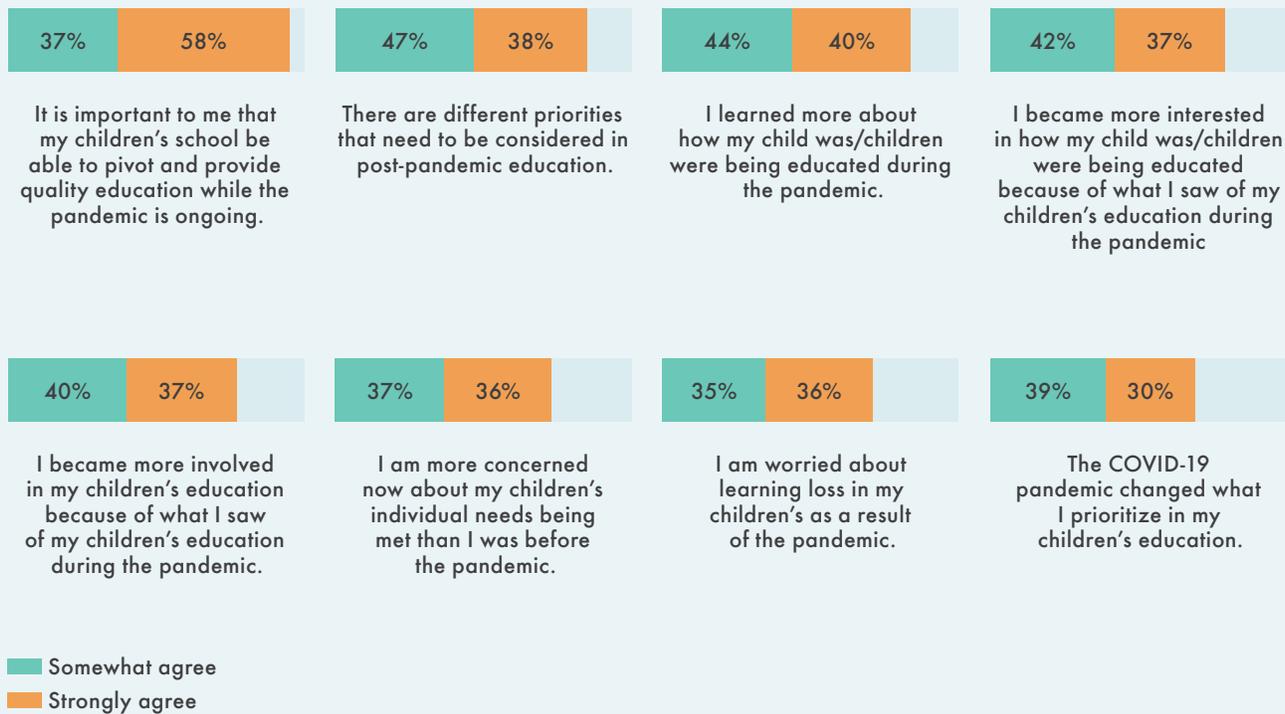
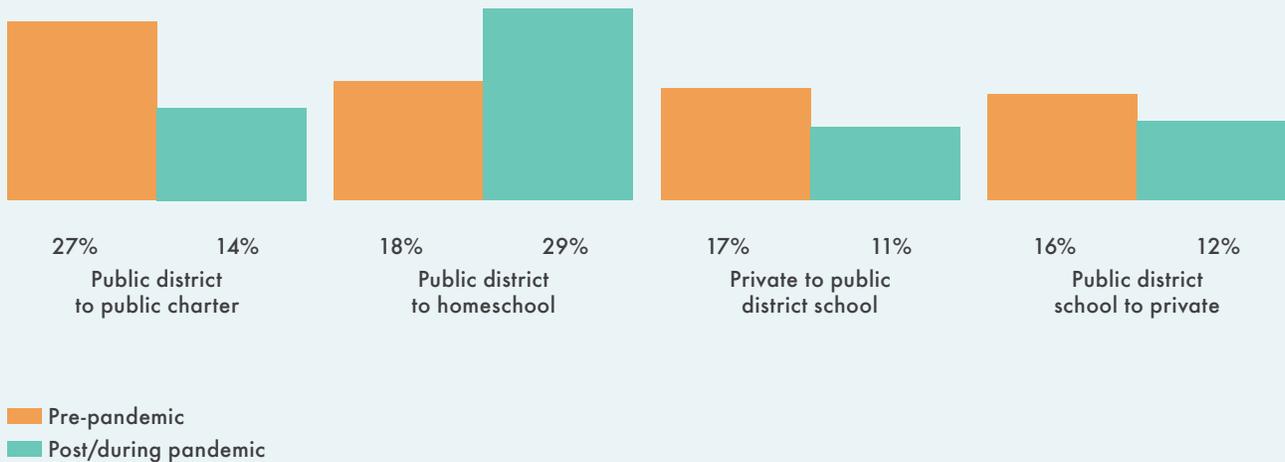


FIGURE 10  
**SWITCH TYPE:  
 PRE- AND POST-PANDEMIC**



# PARTICULARLY DURING THE PANDEMIC, THERE WAS HEIGHTENED CONCERN ABOUT SAFETY AND THE OVERALL WELLBEING OF STUDENTS WHILE THEY ARE LEARNING.

## Educating the Whole Child

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Without a doubt, there is a minimum expectation that schools should educate students. This is why schools are generally measured by the extent to which students have learned to read, write, compute, and think critically. And yet there are also other important considerations when thinking about the overall educational experience of a child. Particularly during the pandemic, there was heightened concern about safety and the overall well-being of students while they are learning. We wondered whether other non-academic factors might weigh more heavily with parents when deciding where to have their children educated. Perhaps, if all things academic are equal, a family might select a different type of school based on other attributes.

While academics matter to parents, considerations about their child's education extend beyond academic performance. Generally speaking, safety is by far the highest concern: 77% of parents said safety was absolutely essential when it comes to their child's education. By contrast, only 58% of parents cited quality of instruction as absolutely essential. That's nearly 20 percentage points below safety (see Figure 12).

The second most commonly cited factor rated as important by parents when it comes to their child's education is the quality of instruction, although it comes in nearly 20 percentage points below safety, with 58% of parents reporting it as absolutely essential. Individualized support for their child rounded out the top three most

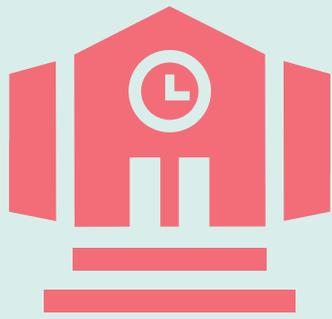
important factors, with 41% of parents citing it as an absolutely essential factor when it comes to their child's education.

Interestingly, some of these factors were more likely than others to become more important to parents during the pandemic—namely safety (59% reported that this became more important to them), teachers' flexibility and adaptability (44%), and school or class sizes (37%).

As a special, autonomous type of public school, charter schools are uniquely equipped to offer more flexibility for teachers, smaller learning environments, and more individualized support for students—exactly what many parents wanted to find in their search for schooling options. As an example, parents of charter students stood apart in that they seek out culturally affirming environments for their child at a much higher rate than parents at district public schools or private schools. That's 40% at charter schools vs. 27% at district schools and 30% at private schools when asked which factors were absolutely essential to them when it comes to their child's education. (see Figure 11).

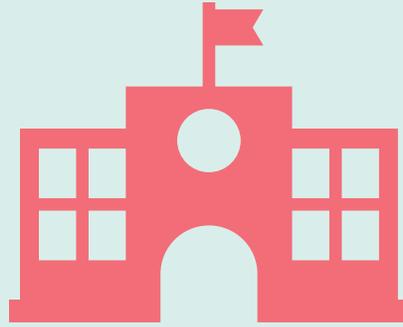
FIGURE 11

# PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO SEEK OUT CULTURALLY AFFIRMING ENVIRONMENTS FOR THEIR CHILDREN, BY SCHOOL TYPE



**40%**

Charter school parents



**27%**

District public school parents



**30%**

Private school parents



A charter school family sends a message to the White House: "Back off our charter school!"



Charter school parent and advocate from New Jersey, Jasmine Morrison, gives remarks at the rally to defend charter schools in May 2022.

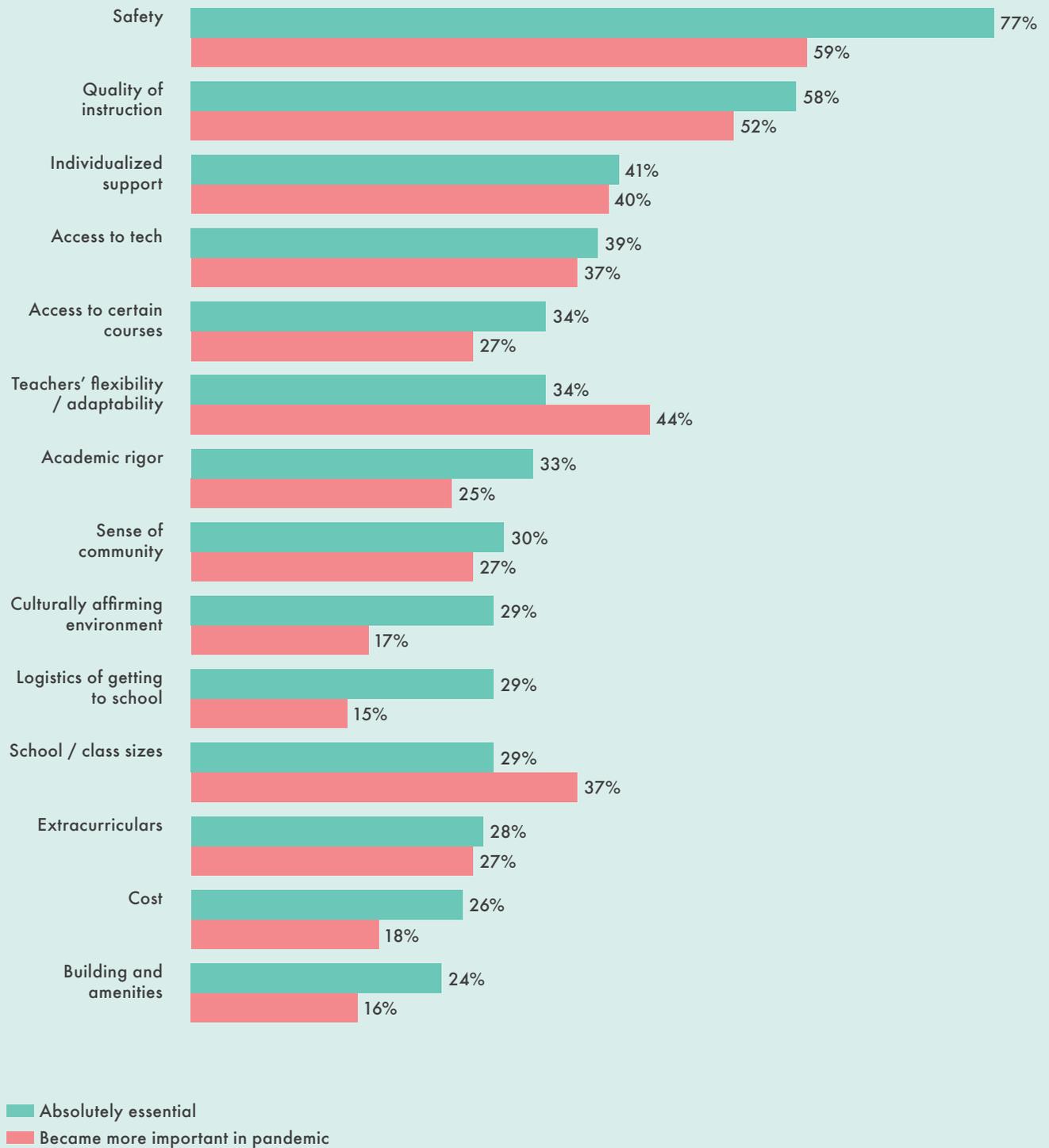
Parents whose children have switched to a charter school during or post-pandemic were consistently more likely than those who did not make this switch to say that most of these factors have become more important to them since the beginning of the pandemic, particularly quality of instruction (71% vs. 51%), academic rigor (42% vs. 24%), sense of community (41% vs. 27%), and a culturally affirming environment for their children (30% vs. 16%).

Since nearly 70%<sup>10</sup> of charter students are Black and Brown, that may help to explain the higher demand for a culturally affirming experience from charter school parents. Black and Brown communities were most severely impacted by the pandemic in terms of mortality and infection rates.<sup>11</sup> Also, the nation's reckoning with racial injustice following the murder of George Floyd while in police custody took place at the height of the pandemic.



A public charter school student leads parents, advocates, and supporters at the rally to defend charter schools in Washington, D.C.

FIGURE 12  
 PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS RATING FACTORS AS  
 “ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL” AND “BECAME MORE IMPORTANT  
 IN THE PANDEMIC”



# AMONG PARENTS WHO SWITCHED SCHOOL TYPES DURING OR AFTER MARCH OF 2020, 75% REPORTED THAT COVID-RELATED FACTORS CONTRIBUTED TO THE REASON THEY HAD THEIR CHILD SWITCH SCHOOLS.

## The Switchers

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Enrolling a child in a new school is not a simple task, as any parent of a school-aged child who has done so can attest. Among other things, it involves researching the new school, filling out forms, providing health records, and producing other documentation such as birth certificates and proof of residency. Adding the complexity of a pandemic could only have made it even more difficult, since many offices were closed, and it was harder to do things like get duplicate copies of immunization records. It is therefore noteworthy when an unusually high number of families decide to switch their children's schools.

While most parents of school-aged children have never had their children switch school types, slightly more than a quarter (27%) have done so (see Figure 13). Those who have switched their child's school-type tend to be more educated (30%), live in a multi-parent household (27%), or have a child with special needs (34%). Of those whose children have *never* switched school types before, the majority (63%) have never considered switching to a different school type, either.

There does appear to be an increase in the volume of school-type switchers in recent years. Of the parents surveyed, 15% say their child switched school types prior to March of 2020 whereas 17% said their child switched during or after March of 2020, a span of just over two years (see Figure 14).

Nearly one-third of parents of switchers said they switched their child's school type due to unhappiness with the education their child was receiving (36%) or the environment of their child's previous school (35%). This was consistent across parent demographics and was equally cited among those who switched pre-pandemic, as well as those who switched during or since March 2020. However, these reasons were much more likely to be cited among parents whose child has switched out of a public district school. Of these parents, 42% were unhappy with the education their child was receiving and 40% did not like the environment of their child's previous school.

Parents who were unhappy with their children's education and/or the learning environment say they were unhappy with the following factors: quality of instruction

FIGURE 13

### PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO SAY THEIR CHILD EVER SWITCHED SCHOOL TYPES

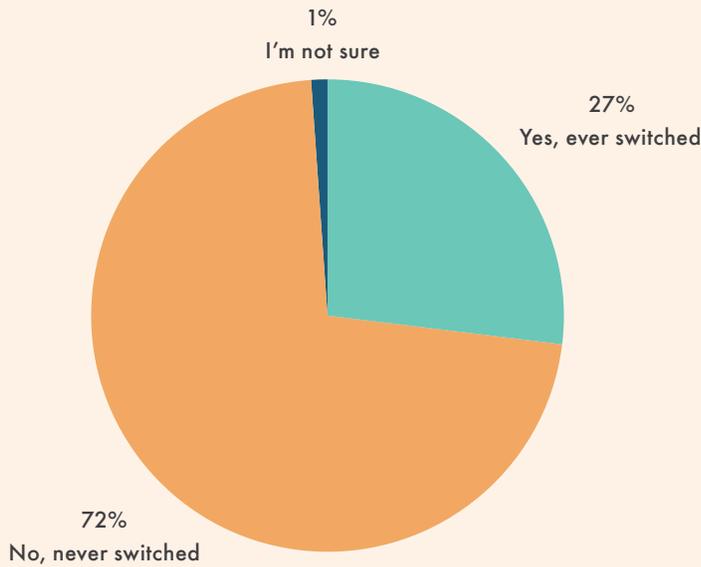


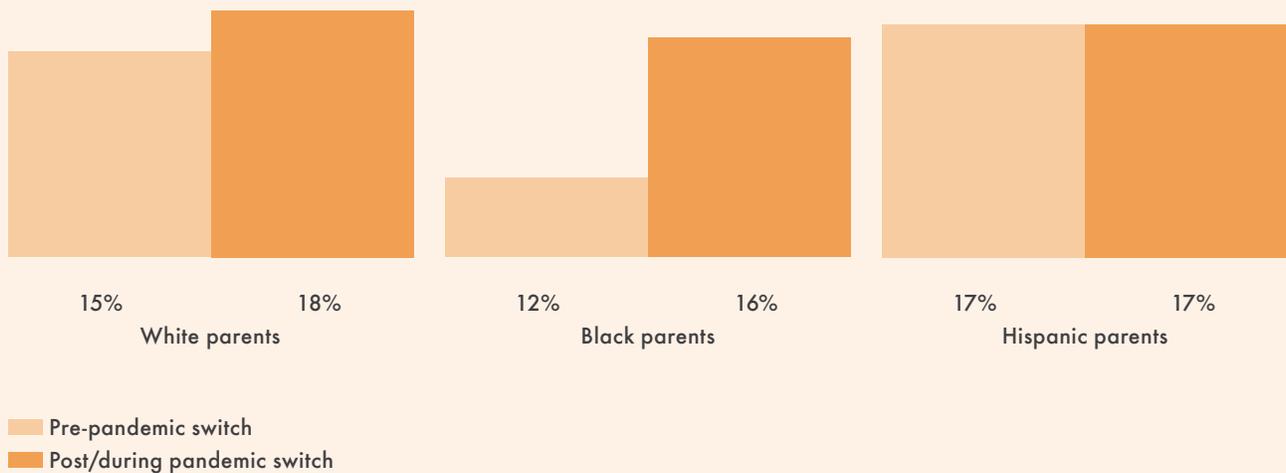
FIGURE 14

### TIMING OF SWITCH



FIGURE 15

### PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS REPORTING THEY SWITCHED TYPES OF SCHOOL FOR A CHILD BY PRE/POST-PANDEMIC TIMEFRAME



(53%), safety (42%), and level of individualized support for their child (42%). Unsurprisingly, these mirror the factors that parents previously reported as absolutely essential in their child's education.

Among those who switched school types during or after March 2020, 75% reported that COVID-19-related factors contributed to the reason they had their child switch school types, most typically COVID-19 safety precautions (or lack thereof) (39%) and lack of options during the COVID-19 pandemic (33%).

Further, the landscape of those who are switching school types or considering a switch may be shifting. While the overall rate of school-type switching increased across the board with the pandemic, there was a noticeable uptick among certain parental demographic groups (see Figure 15):

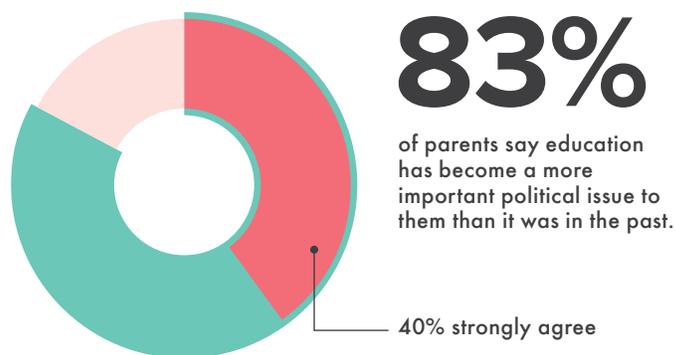
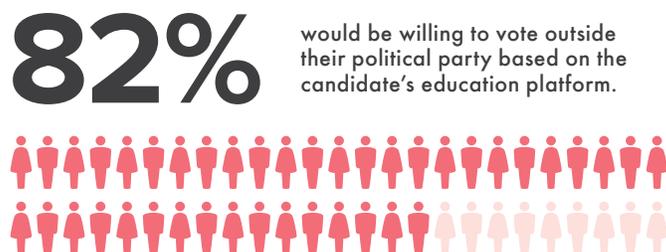
- ▶ Fifteen percent of white parents said that their children had ever switched school types prior to the pandemic, compared to 18% for switches that occurred during or post-pandemic. These families primarily switched their children from public district schools to homeschooling (31%) or private school (13%).
- ▶ Eleven percent of lower-income families said their children had ever switched school types prior to the pandemic, compared to 17% for pandemic switchers. These families overwhelmingly switched their children to homeschooling (38%), which for many is an unsustainable option.
- ▶ Twelve percent of Black parents said that their children had ever switched school types prior to the pandemic, compared to 16% who switched during or post-pandemic. These families primarily switched their children from public district schools to homeschooling (34%) or public charter school (12%).
- ▶ Seventeen percent of Hispanic parents said that their children had never switched school types prior to the pandemic, which remained the same for switches that occurred during or post-pandemic. These families primarily switched their children from public district schools to homeschooling (28%) or public charter school (18%).

# EDUCATION IS SUCH A MAJOR ISSUE AMONG PARENTS THAT 82% SAID THEY WOULD BE WILLING TO VOTE FOR SOMEONE OUTSIDE OF THEIR POLITICAL PARTY IF THE CANDIDATE'S EDUCATION PLATFORM ALIGNED WITH THEIR VIEWS.

## Is the Education Voter Now a Swing Voter?

In addition to exploring families' educational choices and patterns, and their satisfaction with school options, the survey sought to understand the likely significance of education in elections. Respondents identified themselves as a mix of Democrats (35%), Republicans (30%), Independents (28%), and Other (7%) (see Figure 5). As noted earlier, 83% of parents say education has become a more important political issue to them than it was in the past. This sentiment was consistently expressed by respondents representing all political leanings, with a difference of no more than three percentage points between any group. Education is such a major issue among parents that 82% said they would be willing to vote for someone outside of their political party if the candidate's education platform aligned with their views. In fact, more than one in three *strongly* agree (36%), particularly for Democrats (36%) over Republicans (31%), parents under age 35 (40%), and Black parents (41%).

Further, as previously noted, many parents who vote in both state/local and federal elections (55%) (see Figure 4) report that education becomes a more important issue to them in state/local elections. Among voters in Arizona, a state with contentious upcoming local, state, and federal elections, parents also expressed this sentiment at a high rate—51% strongly agree.



As the nation heads into the 2022 election season, much hangs in the balance. There are 36 gubernatorial seats in play this fall. Education will surely be on the ballot, just as it was in 2018 and 2021. In each of those years, a major gubernatorial election was largely determined by parents who cast their votes based on the candidates' positions on education.

In 2021, Glenn Youngkin<sup>12</sup> won Virginia's gubernatorial election by riding a wave of parental frustration about public district schools that failed to open for in-person instruction. He also promised to make schools more accountable to parents and to enact policies that give parents more choices among schooling options.

In 2018, Ron DeSantis<sup>13</sup> won the race for governor of Florida by making school choice a centerpiece of his campaign. In a race decided by fewer than 40,000 votes, his unusually high level of support among Black women (18%, or about 100,000 votes) clinched the win. Black women chose DeSantis, who is white, over an anti-school choice Black Democrat, Andrew Gillum, proving that parents are indeed willing to cross party and racial lines on the issue of education.

Data from this survey suggest that candidates should really listen to their constituents—especially parents—so that they do not fall on the wrong side of the education issue. If not, it may have the power to cost them the election. Education voters may very well be the new swing voters, elevating parents to single-issue voters on education.

## Gwen Samuel: I Can't and Won't Sacrifice My Children for Any Political Party

There is an old saying: “Never say never.” When education politics harms children instead of helping them thrive, there is a problem—and a serious one at that!

“At age 18, as soon as I was old enough, I registered to vote as a Democrat,” says Gwen Samuel, a parent, grandparent, and education and economic freedom advocate. “I always identified with the Democratic narrative of supporting disenfranchised communities of color and creating opportunity for the underserved, until I was forced to admit there was a gap between what they were promising to deliver and what was actually being delivered to communities that look like mine. We are treated as victims in need of saving versus parents capable of thinking and knowing what’s best for our children.”

In her work as the founder and president of the Connecticut Parents Union, she engages and equips marginalized communities to be informed and active in the civic engagement process so they can effect the changes needed in their homes, communities, and schools. After the tragic loss of two of her sons, Ms. Samuel soldiers on with her advocacy work to ensure all children, no matter their background, can access a high-quality educational experience. Ms. Samuel is a source of strength and support for thousands of families in her neighborhood, in Connecticut, and across the country.

“I realize there are no do-overs in life. We must get it right for children.” Ms. Samuel has become increasingly worried about the state of education for Black and Brown families and the lack of Democratic support for school choice to help families like hers. It was the de-prioritization of a youth summer employment funding program for kids by the Connecticut legislature in 2017 that led Ms. Samuel to change her voter registration to Unaffiliated. “It should go without saying: our children are the true foundation of our future because they are the future community leaders

and our future workforce. If we can find billions to invest in roads, bridges, and bonuses, we can surely support innovative, high-quality charter schools amongst our traditional schools, thus ensuring parents have access to various educational opportunities to ensure the academic and future success of their children. No parent, taxpayer, or lawmaker should have to support a budget that chooses between life’s basic needs or a quality education—they are not interchangeable.”

In 2022, still feeling the lack of change needed in the education system of her state, Ms. Samuel made the principled and informed decision to register as a Republican. “Our babies need schooling options now. Period. Education options help them move from surviving the pandemic to thriving despite the pandemic. I need to cast my vote for people who share my vision for expanding education opportunities for our future workforce.”



**“I need to cast my vote for people who share my vision for expanding education opportunities for our future workforce.”**

# THE VAST MAJORITY OF PARENTS AGREE THAT, ALTHOUGH THEY MAY NOT CHOOSE A CHARTER SCHOOL FOR THEIR CHILD, CHARTER SCHOOLS SHOULD BE AVAILABLE TO FAMILIES WHO WOULD CHOOSE THEM.

## The New Altruism

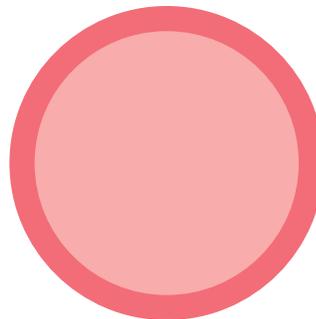
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We as a society value education and believe all children should have an education that prepares them for success in life. However, because access to high-quality schools is not evenly distributed in America, parents are generally motivated to find the best option for their own children, rather than advocate for others. Just a few years ago, polling suggested parents were less interested in public school choice, preferring instead to see greater investment in public district schools.<sup>14</sup> Data from this new survey of parents by The Harris Poll suggests that this might no longer be the case.

Parents want choice—for themselves and other families, too. Regard for the importance of quality education for all children, not just their own, is high among today's parents. As previously noted, education has risen in political importance to most parents, and is a key consideration for these individuals in elections. Parents also appear to respect the individual choices and beliefs of other parents whose situations might not mirror their own. This is perhaps a new altruism.

Historically, parents with higher incomes have had the option to live in a neighborhood with a great school or to enroll their children in a private school. Families with lesser incomes usually have fewer options available and therefore tend to be vocal advocates for more educational choice.

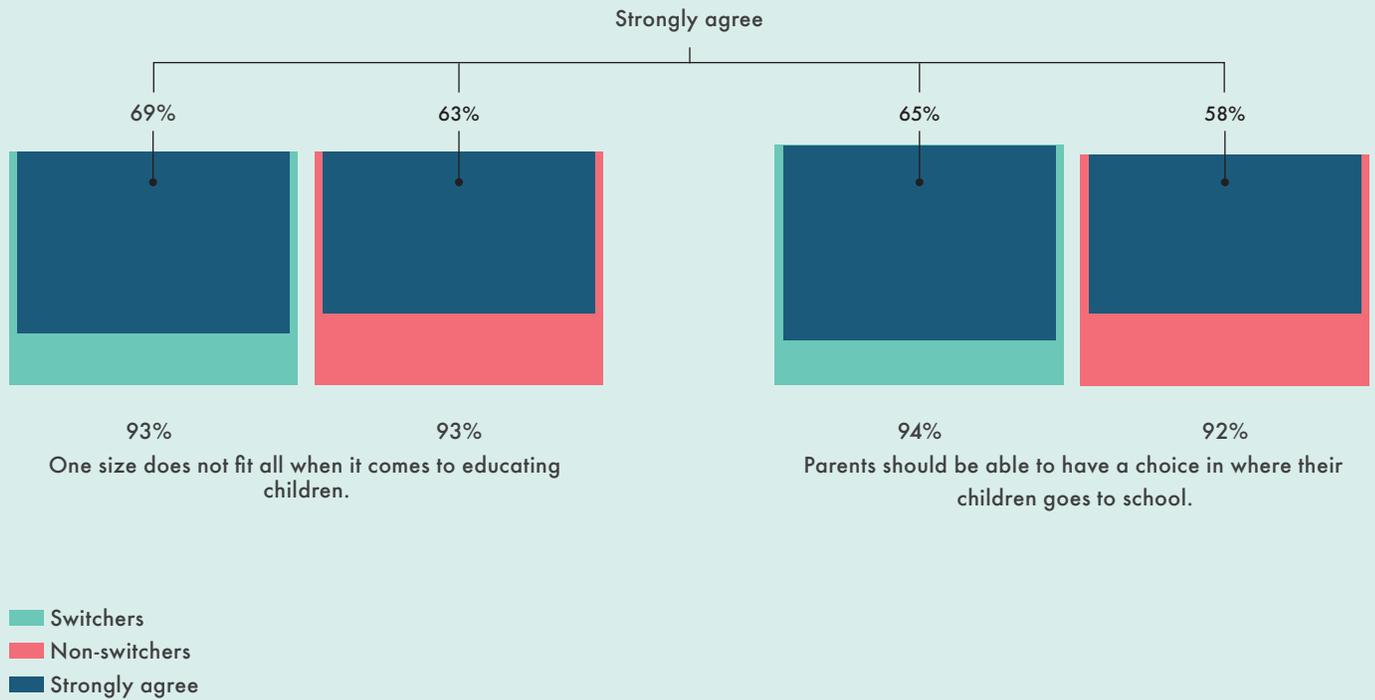
Even among those parents who might not choose a charter school for their child, 84% agree that charter schools should be available to families who would choose them. While these sentiments are slightly higher among parents whose children have switched school types, majorities of switchers (69%) and non-switchers (63%) say one size does not fit all when it comes to educating children, and parents should be able to have a choice in where their children goes to school (65% and 58%, respectively) (see Figure 16).



# 84%

of parents, who might not choose a charter school for their child, agree that charter schools should be available to families who would choose one.

FIGURE 16  
**AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE BY SWITCHING STATUS**



This notion of “one size does not fit all” sometimes applies even within a single family. Among the school-type switchers identified in this survey, we found some families (6%) had children enrolled in multiple educational settings. For example, one child might attend a public charter school, while another in the same household is homeschooled. Further, it is entirely possible that a child’s needs might change over the course of their academic career. Maybe a district public school is the best option for the elementary years and a charter school might be the right fit for the middle school years. Parents want options for themselves and for others, and most importantly they want options for the future.

We hypothesize that parents are more open minded about educational options at least in part because they can relate to other families who want to preserve choices for themselves and their children should they be needed in the future. Embracing choice is therefore not just to respond to an immediate need for a particular group. It reflects a better understanding that conditions can change in any community or within a family. Therefore, it makes sense for the family to be able to pivot if they need to.



A charter school family takes a break from sign waving at the May 2022 rally.

## The Guerra Family: My Children Learn Differently. They Need Education Options.

The Guerra family of Albuquerque, New Mexico, has tried three different school models: private, brick-and-mortar public charter, and full-time virtual public charter schools. Understanding their children's changing academic needs and identifying their strengths and areas of scholastic interest helps guide the family in selecting school options that are best for Emma and Cayden.

Emma is a fourth grader at Pecos Cyber Academy—and is thriving. The family needed a school that allowed seat-time flexibility while also providing access to excellent curriculum, state-certified teachers, and structured classes while mom Ashley fought Leukemia. Now in remission, Ashley says the online model continues to work for Emma—she has been attending PCA for five years. “The virtual charter school provides our family many opportunities to pursue multiple things at once, like family trips while still being able to access the education material of the day, extracurricular activities like swimming and gymnastics, and the freedom to work around my medical treatment schedules. And it also allows us to work at Emma's pace, taking the time to make sure the subject materials are understood in depth, which I think is a key component of academic success. Emma has learned to love learning.”

But that's not all. The Guerra family knows that kids learn differently and need an education experience that meets their needs. Big brother Cayden is a seventh grader who began his educational experience at a brick-and-mortar charter school and is now enrolled at a private school in Albuquerque. This schooling option offered Cayden a unique opportunity to pursue additional academic and extracurricular interests while continuing to further explore much-loved subjects like science and mathematics. His success in this current academic model is due in large part to his excellent, high-quality educational experience in his elementary charter school.

Ashley says, “We believe each child is different and the educational model chosen for each student should encourage their love of learning, creativity, and prepare them with opportunities to successfully participate and shine in their communities. As a family, we believe in regular assessments of these attributes to ensure that the academic institution chosen is meeting the needs of our family and our children. This is why our children are in schools with different educational models!”

Every family should have the opportunity to choose the school or schools that work best for their children, and the flexibility to make a change if the children's needs change. That means preserving as many high-quality educational options as possible.



**“We believe each child is different and the educational model chosen for each student should encourage their love of learning, creativity, and prepare them with opportunities to successfully participate and shine in their communities.”**

# PARENTS OF ALL RACES, GEOGRAPHIES, AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES OVERWHELMINGLY SUPPORT THE EXPANSION OF CHARTER SCHOOLING OPTIONS.

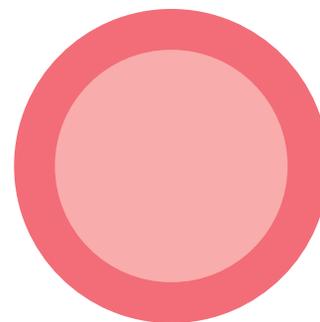
## Demand for Charter Schools

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Charter schools are an important part of the public education landscape. These innovative public schools enroll 3.6 million students nationwide and overwhelmingly serve high-need communities. During the pandemic years, charter schools were the only public schools that experienced enrollment growth.<sup>15</sup> In some places like Washington, D.C., where charter school enrollment is already quite high (nearly 50% of public schools in the city), enrollment was flat. We wondered if flat enrollment in some cities and states is because there was nowhere to grow, or if it reflects lower parent demand. We also wondered if enrollment numbers masked true parent demand and/or willingness to grow the charter sector.

We found that parents of all races, geographies, and political ideologies overwhelmingly support the expansion of charter schooling options. Close to 3 in 4 or more parents:

- ▶ Would consider sending their child to a public charter school if one were available in their area (74% agree—significantly high among independent voters (77%), low-income (78%) and lower education attainment parents (75-79%), parents of color (79-81%) and parents in the West (78%).



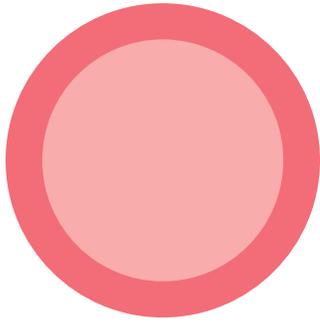
# 74%

of parents agree that they would consider sending their child to a public charter school if one were available in their area.

- ▶ In the political battleground states of Arizona and Georgia, the numbers are even higher than national averages. Arizona is the only state in the nation to reach the milestone of having 20% of public school students enrolled in charter schools,<sup>16</sup> and 82% of Arizona parents would send their children to a charter school if one were available. In Georgia, 83% of parents felt the same.

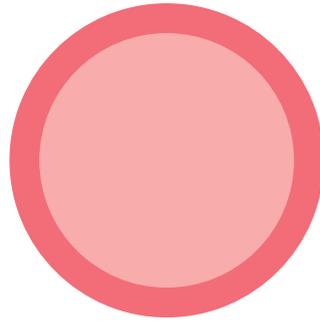
- ▶ Want more public charter school offerings in their area (77% agree—consistent across political affiliation; significantly high among low-income (82%) and lower education attainment parents (80%), parents with special needs children (81%), and parents of color (82-83%)).

- ▶ Support expanding the number of slots in existing public charter schools in their area (81% agree—significantly high among low-income parents (84%), Blacks (85%), Hispanics (83%), and parents in the South (83%) and in particular, Georgia (86%)).



**77%**

of parents agree that they want more public charter school offerings in their area.



**81%**

of parents agree that they support expanding the number of slots in existing public charter schools in their area.

While many parents who do not have a child currently enrolled in a charter school have not considered charter schools as an option, 72% of those who have considered charter schools cite numerous obstacles that have prevented them from enrolling their child in a charter school, namely that there are no charter schools (23%) or not enough charter schools (20%) in their area. Among other obstacles, 18% of parents didn't know how to go about enrolling a child in a charter school, and about another 1 in 10 or more tried but were either waitlisted (13%) or did not get selected in the lottery system (11%) (see Figure 17).



A young charter school student joins the demonstration outside the U.S. Department of Education in May 2022.

FIGURE 17  
LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS  
ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOLS



I support expanding the number of slots in existing public charter schools in my area (i.e., allowing more children to enroll in public charters).



I want more public charter school offerings in my area (i.e., opening public charter schools or expanding the number of charters).



I would consider sending my children to a public charter school if one were available in my area.



Having caps on enrollment for public charter schools limits children's educational opportunities.



There are too many barriers to getting into public charter schools.

■ Somewhat agree  
■ Strongly agree

## Digital Pioneers: Parent Demand Gives Way to Parent Action

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When a group of parents at a Washington, D.C., charter school needed a new high school for their children, they worked together to create one by expanding a public charter middle school that had already served them well. That's parent power at work.

Digital Pioneers Academy (DPA) is a public charter school located in Southeast Washington, DC, currently serving middle- and high-school students. But it wasn't always that way. DPA first opened as only a middle school in 2018. After two years of excellent service to students, the families of DPA rallied the D.C. Public Charter School Board to approve adding high school grades. At a virtual board meeting in 2020, during the height of the pandemic, parents gave impassioned testimony to convince the board to add more grades to serve their children.

DPA recognizes that a computer science education is not just nice to have, it is a "must have." That is why every student at DPA learns computer science at every grade level. This computer science and technology-focused curriculum is necessary to give scholars access to high-paying and high-demand technology jobs in D.C. and across the globe. This focus on technology became even more important during the pandemic, when most schools adopted at least some form of virtual learning.

DPA parent Todd Carroll, Sr. said, "It's been a real pleasure to see that something new and fresh and exciting like a school that deals with STEM education and computer science and robotics and coding is available for kids in D.C. Principal Ashton made sure that the kids have everything they need during this pandemic as far as Chrome notebooks, providing lunches and meals, supplies, and access to internet for those that need assistance. I mean, it's just been wonderful. And I think it'd be a real good thing for the city to have a [high]school to specialize in this."

Another parent, Michelle Brown, testified, "We live in Ward 8, and my son has some learning disabilities. And

I wouldn't have known [without] Digital Pioneers Academy. They were the ones that brought it to my attention. I call them my village. So with the help of my village, Anthony grew. At the end of seventh grade, Anthony was able to make honor roll. If it wasn't for the staff working with him and letting him know that he could achieve anything he wants and not giving up on him during his difficult times, I don't know where we would be."

Simone Scott, a founding DPA parent, gave an impassioned plea to the D.C. Charter School Board. "I am begging you to truly understand that our kids' hopes in themselves and their possibilities [will] continue with DPA as a high school. For you, this may be a decision of yes or no for a building. But for us and my family, it is a lifeline." Scott is a survivor of domestic violence and homelessness. She described DPA as a place where her child has an opportunity to progress not just academically, but also socially and emotionally. She added, "It is stability for us. DPA has provided a safe place where not only is he developing as a young man, we are thriving as a family."

Further, she explained that students are the driving force behind the push to create a new high school. Parents are supportive but are also an extension of their children. "We as adults are listening to their demands for a high school. This isn't the parents deciding that we want a school for them. They are demanding from us that we do what it takes for you to hear their voices. They are screaming for you to know their voices matter, their dreams matter, their futures matter, and it all comes down to your decision."

The efforts of these parents paid off. In December 2020, DPA was fully approved by the D.C. Public Charter School Board to expand to serve grades 9–12. DPA's families demanded an expedited expansion of the school due to the challenges that arose during the pandemic. In addition to a high-quality education, parents wanted to provide students with continuity during an uncertain time

**Ultimately, we are accountable to the families we are honored to serve. It means everything to know that parents trust us and pushed to find a way for us to continue educating their students past the middle school years.**

in the world as they transitioned to high school.

Mashea Ashton, Founder and Principal of Digital Pioneers Academy said, “Ultimately, we are accountable to the families we are honored to serve. It means everything to know that parents trust us and pushed to



A Digital Pioneers Academy student shows her work to an instructor.



Digital Pioneers Academy students and teachers work together on a lesson.

find a way for us to continue educating their students past the middle school years. Thankfully, we were able to smoothly transition to remote learning during the pandemic, thanks to our agile team and technologies we already had in place. DPA acted fast to deliver meals to students in need and ensured that every student had a Google Chromebook and reliable internet access. Thanks to these actions and the support of our entire DPA community, we achieved a 94% daily attendance rate during remote learning and 94% family satisfaction. DPA is proud to serve scholars from some of the most under-resourced neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. Our student body is 99% Black and 98% of our scholars qualify for free-or-reduced lunch. We require our scholars to learn computer science at every grade level, putting all our scholars on a path to success in these high-demand fields if they so choose.



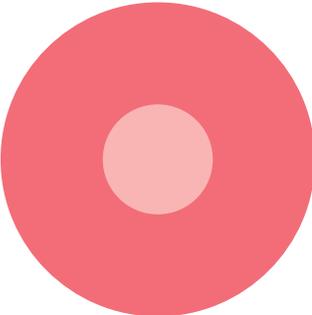
National Alliance President and CEO Nina Rees joins a lesson with students at Digital Pioneers Academy.

# ONE THING IS SURE: PARENTS WANT TO HAVE A SAY IN HOW THEIR CHILDREN ARE EDUCATED, AND THAT IS NOT LIKELY TO CHANGE.

## Conclusion

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic made all of us more focused on our communities, more engaged with our families, and more hands-on. Some of us learned to bake bread or grow our own herbs and vegetables. Many of us got to know our neighbors and created deeper connections with those around us.

Americans also found their voices and spoke up on a range of social and political issues. A new generation of advocates was born. It therefore makes sense that parents became involved in PreK–12 education in a different way. Parents spent much more time at home with their children. Sometimes they saw things they didn't love, and it compelled them to make a change. Currently, only 35% of parents are highly satisfied with the quality of their children's education in public district schools, compared to 74% whose children who attend private schools and 72% who are homeschooling their children.



**35%**

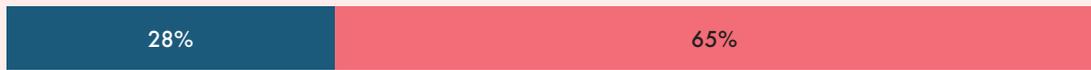
parents who are highly satisfied with the quality of their children's education in public district schools

Black and Hispanic parents appear particularly frustrated with their local schooling options (see Figure 19):

- ▶ 71% of Black parents strongly agree that one size does not fit all when it comes to educating children.
- ▶ 70% of Black parents and 63% of Hispanic parents strongly agree that parents should be able to have a choice in where their children go to school.
- ▶ 60% of Black parents and 54% of Hispanic parents strongly agree that they think having more than one type of public school option is a good thing.
- ▶ 53% of Black parents and 40% of Hispanic parents strongly agree that they want options for their children other than the district school they are zoned for or assigned.

Only time will tell whether enrollment growth in homeschooling and private schools will continue, level off, or decline. Charter school enrollment has been steadily increasing every year since the first one opened its doors nearly 30 years ago, and we're betting that will continue (see Figure 18).

FIGURE 18  
LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS  
ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE



One size does not fit all when it comes to educating children.



Parents should be able to have a choice in where their child goes to school.



I think having more than one type of public school option is a good thing.



I want options for my child other than the district school we are zoned for.



I feel like I don't have good options when it comes to the school my child attends.



I feel trapped in my public district school.

■ Somewhat agree  
■ Strongly agree

FIGURE 19  
**LEVEL OF STRONG AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

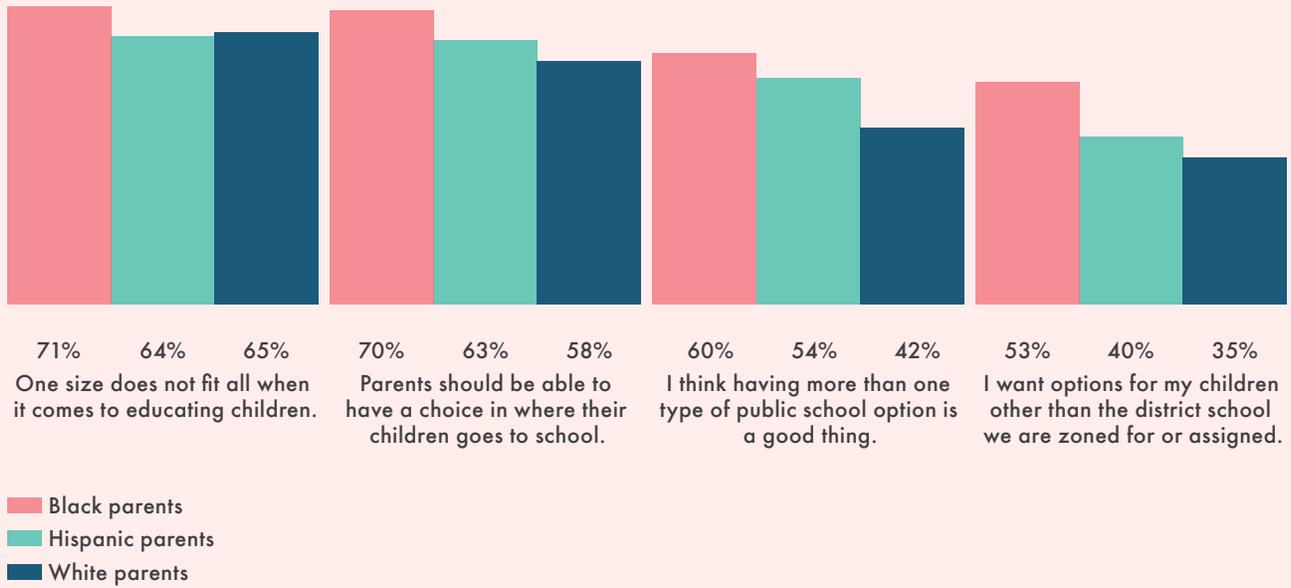


FIGURE 20  
**“I WANT MY CHILDREN TO STAY AT THEIR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL”**

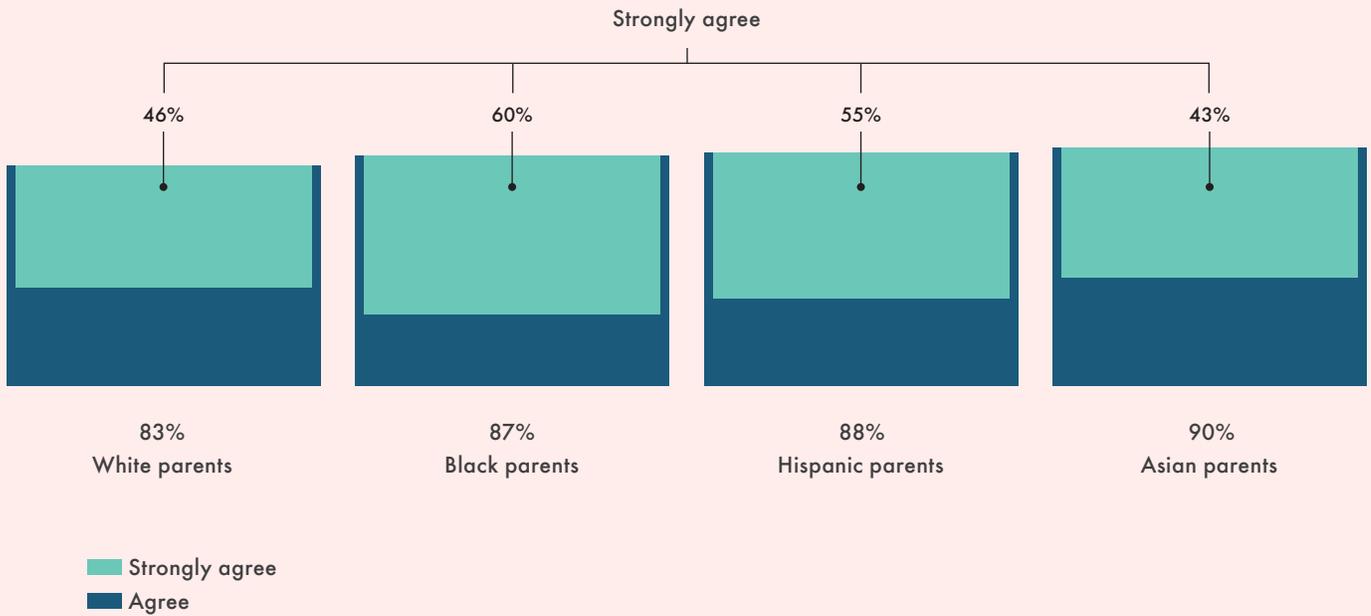


FIGURE 21  
**LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS  
 ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOLS AMONG PARENTS  
 OF CHILDREN ENROLLED IN A CHARTER SCHOOL**

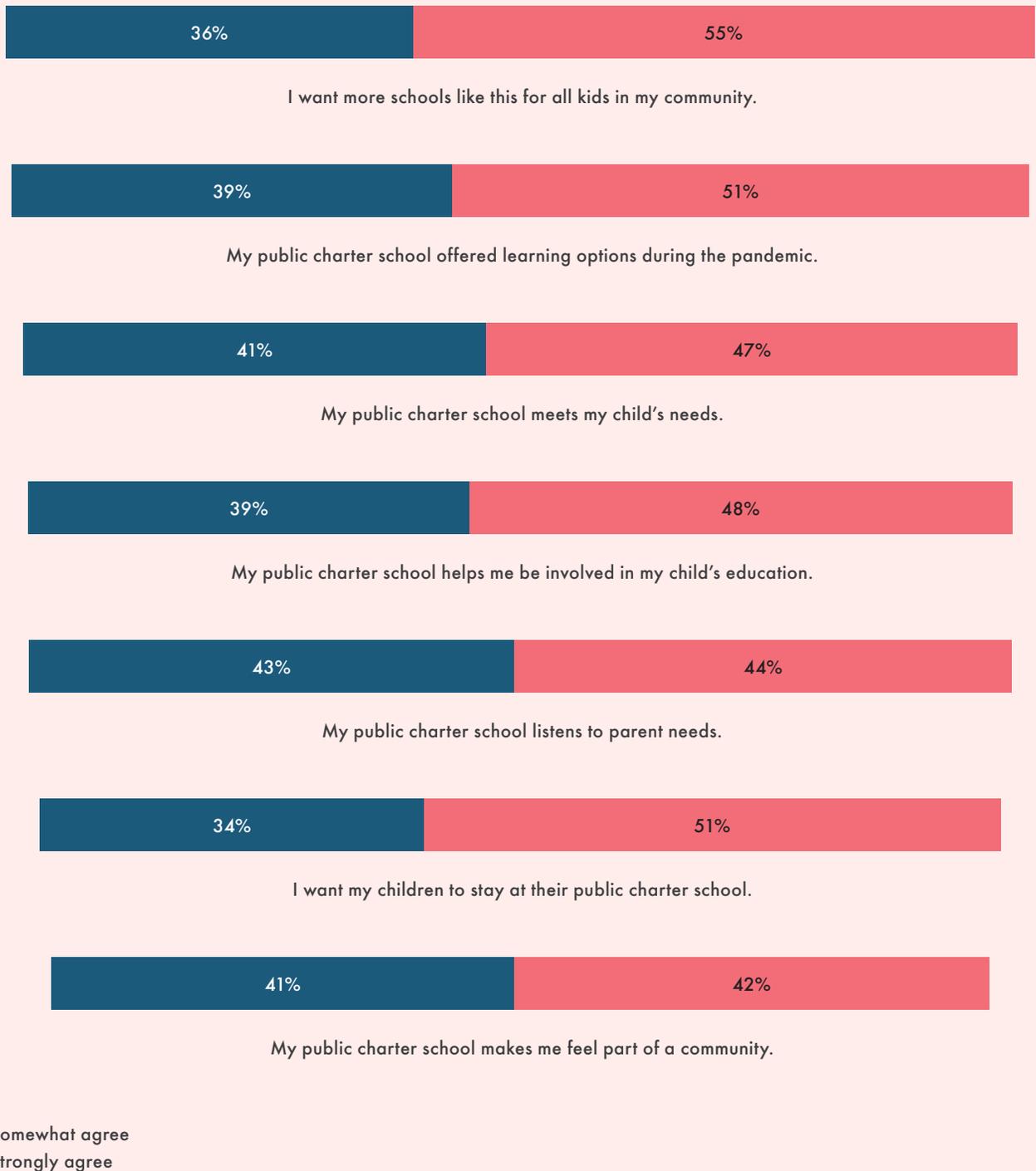
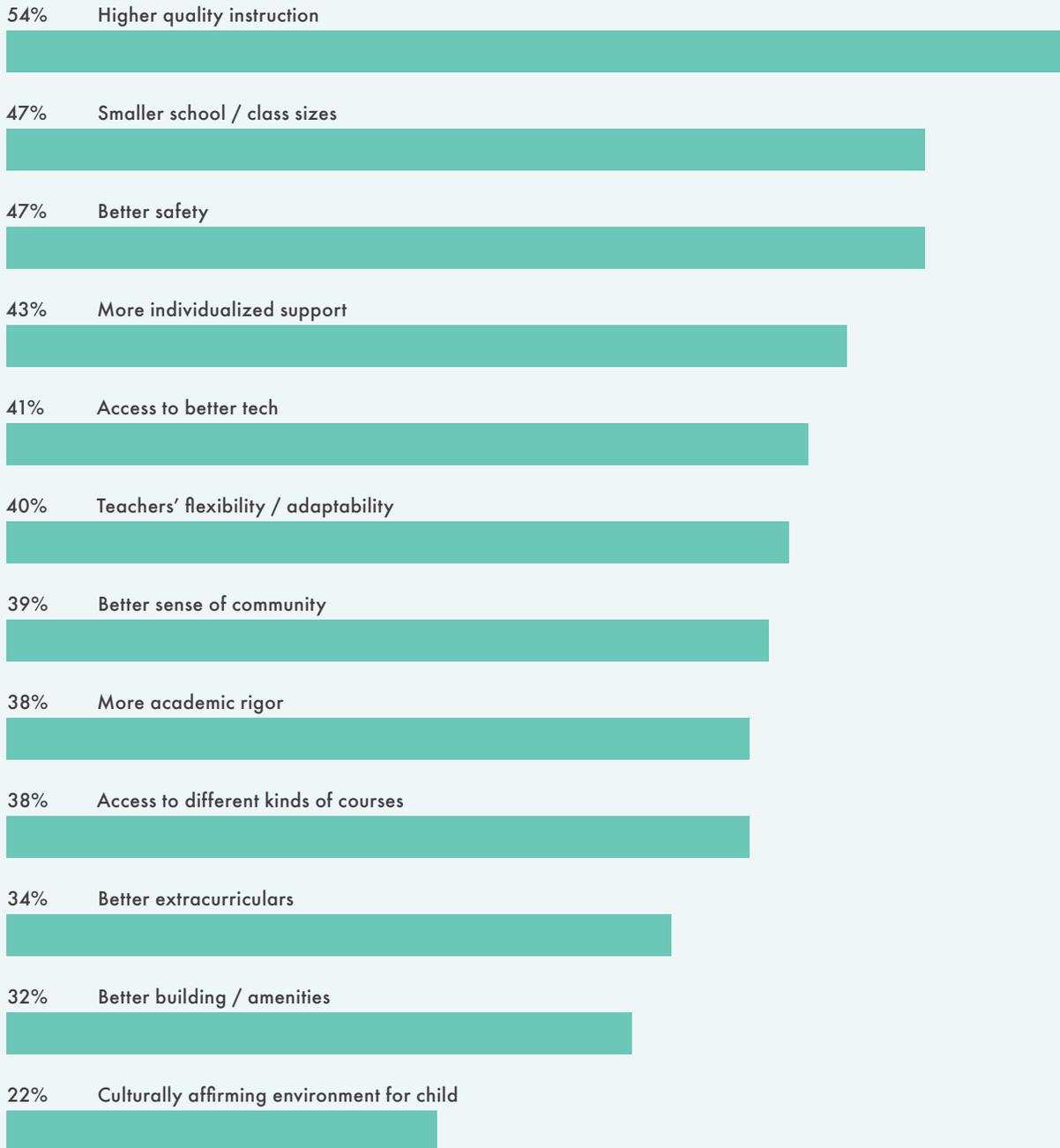


FIGURE 22

# PERCENTAGE OF CHARTER SCHOOL PARENTS CITING A FACTOR IN CHOOSING A CHARTER SCHOOL



But one thing is sure: Parents want to have a say in how their children are educated, and that is not likely to change. They want more and better options for their children and they believe strongly in parental choice in education. Even more importantly, they realize now that they have the power to create positive change—not only for their own children, but for all students.

Charter schools are uniquely well suited for this moment because they are designed to respond to parent and community needs. Parent and community engagement is at the core of the charter school model. For parents who are seeking a more personalized learning experience and want to engage with the instructional team to actively participate in their kids' learning experience, charter schools might be very appealing.

Charter schools help meet the needs of parents who are seeking alternatives for their child. For parents whose children are in public charter schools, sentiments are unanimously positive about these schools, regardless of parent demographics. Of note, however, Black parents were more likely to strongly agree that they want their children to stay at their public charter school than their white counterparts (see Figure 20).

Overall, parents who chose to send their children to public charter schools report that they did so because charter schools exhibited characteristics of higher quality instruction (54%), smaller school and class sizes (47%), and better safety (47%) (see Figure 22). Black parents are more likely than their white counterparts to say that they sought out access to better technology (50%) and access to different kinds of courses (e.g., STEM, AP, IB, etc.) (46%).

Interest and enrollment in charters could rise if more parents were familiar with them. Currently, only 34% of parents say they are familiar or very familiar with charter schools. However, with majorities indicating they want school choice coupled with the post-pandemic environment that left parents looking at their children's education differently, educating parents about what charter schools can offer them and their children will likely show that charter schools are the right option to meet the moment.

## Methodology

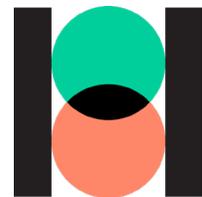
The research was conducted online in the USA by The Harris Poll on behalf of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools among 5,002 parents with school-aged children, defined as US adults age 18+ who are parents or legal guardians of a child or children residing in their household that were enrolled in grades pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade at the end of the 2021-22 school year. The survey was conducted between May 19th and May 31st, 2022.

Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, household income, and propensity to be online to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. As such, the findings are representative and projectable onto the total US population of interest, i.e., parents with school-aged children (pre-kindergarten to 12th grade).

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within  $\pm 1.9$  percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This

credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.



## Endnotes

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16 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Voting with Their Feet: A State-level Analysis of Public Charter School and District Public School Enrollment Trends, September 2021, [https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021-09/napcs\\_voting\\_feet\\_rd6.pdf](https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021-09/napcs_voting_feet_rd6.pdf)

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NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR  
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CHARTER  
SCHOOLS**